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## THE WEST INDIA TRADE BEFORE THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

THE subject with which this paper deals has not lacked for treatment within the last few years but the need for more minute study is clearly apparent. The actual mechanism of the trade has not as yet been sufficiently examined. Only vaguely do we know the kind of vessels employed, the routes followed, and the methods of sale, remittance, and insurance. It has been the writer's endeavor to throw some light on these minor points through the study of documents not formerly brought under contribution.<sup>1</sup> But the difficulties in the way of successful presentation are great. One deals with methods of operation so various as almost to defy classification, with statistics notoriously inaccurate,<sup>2</sup> and with weights, measures, and money values of local and changing determination.<sup>3</sup> Some indulgence may then be granted if the picture presented seems unduly intricate and if finality is at times lacking in the conclusions presented.

In the matter of goods actually exchanged and the localities whence they were derived little can be added to the store of information long accessible, and a brief restatement of the main facts will suffice. The needs of the British West Indies for provisions and lumber were met alike by all of the continental colonies; but of the

<sup>1</sup> In particular the Minutes of the Committee of Trade in the Public Record Office, London (cited P. R. O., B. T. 5); the Clifford Papers and the Pemberton Papers in the collection of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (cited Clifford Papers and Pemberton Papers); the uncatalogued family papers of Joseph H. Coates, Esq., of Philadelphia (cited Coates Papers); and the collection of commercial correspondence recently published by the Massachusetts Historical Society as *Commerce of Rhode Island*, vols. I. and II. (cited *Com. of R. I.*).

<sup>2</sup> The figures furnished by the few surviving official records are nearly always far below the true ones: report of the former inspector-general of exports and imports in America, Irving, to the Committee of Trade, P. R. O., B. T. 5: 1, p. 135; report of the governor of Jamaica on the trade of the island, P. R. O., C. O. 137: 33. McPherson (*Annals of Commerce*, III. 572, note) also calls attention to this fact.

<sup>3</sup> Thus a "thousand" feet of lumber might represent 1000 or 1200 ft., a barrel of flour might be "lightly" or firmly packed, and a hogshead of sugar might contain 12 cwt. or 14. Finally, the pound sterling was worth anywhere from 28 to 160 shillings in the currencies of the various colonies. *Negociator's Magazine* (London, 1754), pp. 213, 214.

latter, certain groups largely controlled the export of particular articles. Pennsylvania and New York, with some assistance from Maryland and Virginia, offered virtually the whole amount of flour and bread; New England, through the industry of its citizens and their trade with Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, stood responsible for most of the fish and oil, though large quantities of both reached the islands through the markets of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York. Pennsylvania again led in supplying beef, pork, hams, and tongues, but her exports were heavily supplemented by those of Virginia and North Carolina. Corn and peas came from the same colonies with the addition of Maryland, while South Carolina and Georgia made their principal contribution in rice.<sup>4</sup> Lumber was to be had at most of the North American ports, but here again distinctions must be made. The southern colonies led in supplying staves of red oak for sugar hogsheads and of white oak for rum casks. Their planks of oak and yellow pine stood in great demand, and their cypress shingles were much preferred to the white cedar shingles sold by the colonies of the middle group. Only in the export of boards and scantling did the New England colonies hold first place, and even there only in the quantity, not the quality, of the goods supplied.<sup>5</sup> Besides these staples many other articles found place in the cargoes which passed constantly to the tropics: horses and other live stock, minor food-stuffs such as butter, cheese, potatoes, and fruit, or manufactures in the shape of soap, lamp oil, pottery, chintzes, and shoes. A widely varied assortment was usually to be found in a single ship. The return ladings from the islands were more restricted in variety and in bulk. Rum, molasses, and sugar naturally predominated in the order named, but coffee and cotton, ginger and pimento, mahogany and logwood, with hides and indigo all found frequent mention in the bills of lading.

The general dimensions of the trade may be estimated with fair accuracy as regards the southbound cargoes, and in so far as we may rely upon official returns. One year with another, the continental colonies exported to the islands goods to a value in American ports of £500,000 sterling. By the addition of the heavy freight charges which commodities so great in bulk as compared with cost of production necessarily bore, a value of £725,000 sterling in West

<sup>4</sup> P. R. O., B. T. 5: 1, pp. 91, 93, 124; Br. Mus., Add. MSS. 12404. McPherson (*Annals*, III. 572) points out that Pa., Mass., Conn., Va., N. Y., R. I., S. C., N. H., and Md. were the heaviest exporters to the West Indies in the order named.

<sup>5</sup> See note 4, also P. R. O., B. T. 5: 1, pp. 103, 124, 140, 152; Br. Mus., Add. MSS. 22677, f. 69.

Indian ports was reached.<sup>6</sup> The subjoined table<sup>7</sup> will show the quantities in which the principal articles involved were sent to the islands. As regards the northbound cargoes no satisfactory estimates either as to values or as to quantities can be made. The West Indians paid for American provisions and lumber in shipments of their produce to North America, in shipments to England, in cash,<sup>8</sup> and in bills of exchange.<sup>9</sup> The North Americans often secured part or all of their return ladings in the French and Dutch islands, and succeeded in entering large quantities of this foreign produce as goods of British origin. Hence it could not even then be ascertained what returns in the direct shipment of their own produce the British islands were able to make. The most trustworthy of the various contemporary estimates places the value of these shipments at £400,000 sterling in West Indian<sup>10</sup> or £420,000 sterling in North

<sup>6</sup> B. T. 5: 1, pp. 12, 158, 159, 160; *ibid.*, 4, p. 468. Irving estimated that the freight charges on lumber and corn amounted to 100 per cent. of the prime cost, on all articles to 45 per cent. Rates ranged from 35 to 40 shillings per ton. The committee of West India merchants, against whom Irving was testifying, practically agreed to his figures.

<sup>7</sup> This table shows the quantities of American provisions and lumber annually consumed in the British West Indies during the years 1771-1773. It is compiled from three tables furnished by Irving (B. T. 5: 1, pp. 90-102), by Edward Long (Br. Mus., Add. MSS. 12404), and by a copy of a report issued by the London Custom House in March, 1775, and signed by Stanley, the secretary (Br. Mus.. Add. MSS. 12431, f. 170).

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Bread and flour,    | 130,000 bbls.    |
| Beef and pork,      | 15,000 "         |
| Fish,               | 17,000 hogsheads |
|                     | 16,000 bbls.     |
|                     | 12,000 quintals  |
| Corn,               | 400,000 bush.    |
| Rice,               | 20,000 bbls.     |
| Boards and planks,  | 21,000 thousand  |
| Staves and heading, | 17,000 "         |
| Hoops,              | 1,900 "          |
| Shingles,           | 16,000 "         |

<sup>8</sup> See note 73.

<sup>9</sup> See note 76.

<sup>10</sup> This is the estimate furnished by Irving to the Committee of Trade. The conflicting nature of the evidence both as to the quantities of British West India produce exported to the continental colonies and as to the value of the whole illustrates the difficulty of reaching final conclusions in regard to many phases of colonial trade at this time. Custom-house records even when discoverable are practically worthless. Bryan Edwards (*Thoughts on the Late Proceedings of Government*, London, 1784) points out that many of the bays, creeks, and shipping places in the islands were remote from the ports of entry and that the masters of American vessels, in order to save delay, made manifests and took out

American ports.<sup>11</sup>

In approaching the methods by which this trade was carried on it is best to consider first that part—a part constituting indeed all but a small fraction of the whole—which was completely or principally in American hands. And here at once there becomes necessary a certain mental readjustment. One must commence by discarding all ideas of business corporations, of shipping lines and liners, of fixed routes, of insurance companies—in short, all familiar notions of the present mechanism of commerce. The American merchants of the day traded individually or in loose partnerships. Their largest ventures seldom involved sums of more than a few hundred pounds<sup>12</sup> and the most wealthy and prosperous were not above giving attention to the minutiae of small transactions. Many of their letters to captains and commercial correspondents read like communications between familiar friends. Price schedules and accounts of sales jostle continually with inquiries concerning the health of the recipient and his "dear" family, with announcements of the sending of gifts and with the extending of invitations, all couched in terms of the utmost cordiality. Moreover the business methods

clearances in advance. In his opinion they usually took out more produce than they entered. But clearances were at times granted for empty casks and hogsheads, which were filled in the foreign islands. That officials in continental ports were guilty of permitting the entry of foreign produce as goods of British origin is well known. (See, e. g., G. L. Beer, *British Colonial Policy 1754-1765*, New York, 1907, p. 239.) Nor are the estimates of the best-informed contemporaries of greater value. At the great inquiry held by the Committee of Trade in 1784, while Irving presented the figures given above, the West India merchants claimed that the British islands exported to the continent produce almost equal in value to the provisions and lumber received. But the committee decided that British West India produce was accepted in payment for only one-half the articles sent from the southern colonies, one-quarter of those from the middle group, and one-tenth of those from New England. P. R. O., B. T. 5: 1, pp. 25, 159, 241. Reports of the governors of Jamaica on the trade of that island in 1765 (P. R. O., C. O. 137: 33) and in 1774 (C. O. 137: 69) show the same startling discrepancies. Of contemporary writers Chalmers (*Opinions on Interesting Subjects*, London, 1784) follows Irving; Sheffield (*Observations*, London, 1784) and McPherson (*Annals*, III. 403) seem to accept the Jamaican report of 1765; and Bryan Edwards (*Thoughts on the Late Proceedings of Government*) places the value of British produce exported to the continent at £460,000. Still more futile must be any attempt to state with exactness the quantity in which any one commodity entered into the trade. For rum, e. g., the estimates vary from 2,800,000 to 4,070,000 gallons.

<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this estimate of freight charges is accurate the amount must have been relatively small. The freight from Barbados to Philadelphia on a hogshead of rum, worth approximately £20 (currency), was only 5 per cent. of that sum. Hist. Soc. of Pa., Wharton Papers, Journal of Charles Wharton, p. 534.

<sup>12</sup> Taking the insurance placed upon eleven cargoes we reach an average of £788 sterling. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 120, 148, 149, 185, 239, 249, 474.

of these men were as easy and unconventional as their epistolary style. Not that they lacked keenness of business sense. Rather was it the case that their very alertness, their intentness upon gain, led them to seek profit whenever, wherever, and however it was to be found. Their ships, like the tramp steamers of to-day, frequently wandered, without prearranged plans, from port to port, the ship-captains buying, selling, bartering, or carrying freights as occasion offered.<sup>13</sup> Hence it resulted that the West Indian trade, instead of being a mere exchange of commodities between two groups of colonies, stood as part of a greater system: stood in intimate connection alike with the coasting traffic and with lines of commerce extending to Nova Scotia, Newfoundland,<sup>14</sup> Great Britain, southern Europe, and Africa. Some analysis is required for making this clear. The connection of the West Indian with the coasting trade was twofold. Southbound cargoes of the former were often assembled by the use of coasters at the larger American ports;<sup>15</sup> northbound cargoes were distributed in like manner.<sup>16</sup> But, in what probably constituted a majority of the voyages, the connection was closer still. The assembling and distribution were operated by the same vessels which plied to and from the islands, and operated moreover in conjunction with coastwise traffic of the ordinary sort. On the way south to the Caribbees goods laden in New England might be partially or wholly exchanged for those of the middle and southern colonies; on the way north rum and sugar might gradually be displaced by rice or flour, bread or iron.<sup>17</sup> Again West Indian and coasting trades alike were closely related to the New England fisheries and to the commerce carried on by the "continental" colonies with Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.<sup>18</sup> In this last-men-

<sup>13</sup> See note 21.

<sup>14</sup> Sir Hugh Palliser, governor of Newfoundland 1764–1769, reported that the trade of New England with that island occupied 104 vessels of an aggregate tonnage of 6048. The amount realized from the sale of the northbound cargoes and of the vessels sometimes sold with them averaged more than £100,000 sterling per year. B. T. 5: 1, p. 147.

<sup>15</sup> Coates Papers, William Redwood to Samuel Coates, Newport, July 6, 1773.

<sup>16</sup> Com. of R. I., I. 134.

<sup>17</sup> As the colonies of the southern group had little shipping of their own New England vessels sometimes left West Indian produce at southern ports even while sailing southwards on fresh visits to the islands. The same vessels sometimes plied between the islands and the southern colonies without returning north. B. T. 5: 1, pp. 103, 104, 125; Com. of R. I., I. 132, 133, 179.

<sup>18</sup> Evidence of Irving and Sir Hugh Palliser before the Committee of Trade, B. T. 5: 1, pp. 93, 94, 146–148; Com. of R. I., I. 406, 417, 460. In 1771 the New Englanders purchased 67,000 quintals of dried fish (principally cod and mackerel) at Newfoundland. The rum used was distilled in New England.

tioned commerce, rum, molasses, and sugar on the one hand, and, on the other, fish of the inferior grade consumed by West Indian slaves, seem to have been the articles most frequently exchanged. Vessels which engaged in the fisheries during the summer months turned south on the approach of winter, bartered their wares along the Atlantic coast as far down as Georgia, and at times concluded their voyages in the Caribbean Sea. Less significant, although perhaps more interesting, is the connection of the West Indian trade with American commerce farther afield. Vessels of the larger sort, having discharged their lumber and provisions in the islands, frequently received there cargoes for the British islands or southern Europe.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the master of such a ship reaching Bridgetown or Kingston might not be sure whether London or Philadelphia would be his next port of call.<sup>20</sup> The return voyage might reverse the process. A North American vessel returning home from Great Britain might be ordered to proceed first to the West Indies either directly or via Madeira or Portugal. At the last-named places wine or salt would be added to the British manufactures and Irish provisions of which her original lading was composed.<sup>21</sup> Last of all there is to be noted the connection of the West Indian commerce with the American slave-trade. Slave vessels, loaded and despatched in North American ports, carried slaves from Africa to the West Indies for sale there.<sup>22</sup> From the West Indies they returned home

<sup>19</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 362, 390, 392, 396, 403, 442, 443. The produce taken down would not purchase a cargo for Europe, but additions were bought with bills of exchange. *B. T.* 5: 1, p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Papers, V. 178. Whether the vessel went to Europe probably depended upon the freight rates, *i. e.*, the possible profits involved. Coates Papers, Edward Dawers to Israel Pemberton, jr. and Company, Antigua, August 27, 1746. On the other hand some American vessels were regularly assigned to such trade. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 433.

<sup>21</sup> The shipment of Irish produce directly to the colonies was not legal until 1778, 18 Geo. III., c. 55; 20 Geo. III., c. 10. It appears however to have taken place. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 299, 304, 306, 307. An interesting voyage was that of the brig *Charlotte* belonging to Aaron Lopez in 1769-1770. She arrived October 29, 1769, at Bristol with pig-iron, mahogany, and logwood. Finding no freight for the West Indies and being herself unsalable, she carried sugar, rice, iron, and tin plates as freight to Dublin. There she took on 300 barrels of beef for Jamaica and received also the order to pick up 30 pipes of wine at Madeira. She was insured to Jamaica, the Bay of Honduras, and Rhode Island. After having been driven into Whitehaven by bad weather, she arrived at Jamaica in June and at Honduras before September. She reached Charleston with mahogany before December 7, 1770. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 295, 298-301, 304, 307, 308, 309, 316, 335, 336, 354.

<sup>22</sup> Just before the Revolution good adult slaves sold in the West Indies for about £35 sterling per head. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 425, 428, 457.

before commencing a fresh voyage,<sup>23</sup> and there is every reason to suppose that they obtained some share of the carrying trade from the islands to the continent.<sup>24</sup>

As to the shipping employed, the greatest variety is again to be observed. Brigs were in the majority but sloops, schooners, and snows<sup>25</sup> were to be found in great numbers. Vessels which engaged from time to time in transatlantic trade were naturally of different type from those which kept to the western hemisphere. The latter were small, averaging at about forty tons<sup>26</sup> and provided only with single decks, on which much of the cargo was placed. The former were double-decked craft<sup>27</sup> of 100 to 300 tons, the majority falling between 100 and 150.<sup>28</sup> As the "out" cargoes south and east bound were much more bulky than the return ladings either from the West Indies or from Europe, and as shipbuilding was in general cheaper in North America than in Europe,<sup>29</sup> these vessels were often sold in British and West Indian ports.<sup>30</sup> In the matter of owner-

<sup>23</sup> E. g., the *Adventure*. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 397, 428, 473; II. 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 456, 461, 462, 467, 468.

<sup>25</sup> A snow was a vessel which carried, besides two principal masts, a small third mast placed behind the main mast and equipped with atrysail.

<sup>26</sup> As to the number and tonnage of the American vessels trading in the British islands the evidence is very conflicting. From the testimony offered by the London committee of West India merchants, by Irving, by William Knox, and others before the Committee of Trade, B. T. 5: 1, pp. 12, 13, 38, 158; from the report in 1774 of the governor of Jamaica, C. O. 137: 69; and from Naval Office Lists, C. O. 142: 16, it has been calculated that some 400 vessels of 40 to 50 tons and something less than half that number with tonnage averaging about three times as much were engaged in the traffic. These vessels, and particularly the smaller ones, made two or three round trips per year. Long points out that the smaller craft enjoyed great advantages in being able to sail over bars and into small streams and ports. Br. Mus., Add. MSS. 12404. Many of them were probably built and operated as co-operative enterprises by groups of persons who were not primarily merchants or shipowners. Letter in the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* for January 23, 1784.

<sup>27</sup> Vessels of 100 tons or upwards were nearly always double-decked. Smaller vessels could cross the ocean but could not be insured. B. T. 5: 1, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> The dimensions of two of these vessels are given as follows. A brigantine of 125 tons burthen—length by the keel 52 ft., beam 20 ft., hold 9½ ft. and between decks 4 ft. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 219. For a larger vessel, length by keel 74 ft., beam 25 ft., hold 12 ft., between decks 4 ft. 8 in. Coates Papers, Elias Bland to John Reynell, London, May 31, 1746. The more perishable part of the cargo was apparently placed between decks. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 441.

<sup>29</sup> James Anderson, who before the American Revolution had been employed by a Glasgow firm as agent for the building of ships at Boston, testified before the Committee of Trade that the best American-built vessels were as costly as British-built craft of the same tonnage but that an inferior type could be constructed more cheaply in America. B. T. 5: 3, p. 486.

<sup>30</sup> B. T. 5: 1, pp. 13, 54; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 6, 104, 118, 144, 147, 151, 152, 160, 191, 219, 357, 401. The prices realized ranged from £250 sterling to £900 sterling. Vessels in good condition brought £500 sterling or more.

ship, fixed rules were again wanting. While in numerous cases merchants or captains appeared as sole owners, joint proprietorship seems to have been the rule.<sup>31</sup> In the smaller vessels North American merchants and captains frequently held joint "risks", and West Indian merchants sometimes acquired interests of one-quarter or one-half. In similar fashion European traders stood as co-owners of ships going to their ports. The system was probably useful, not only in decreasing the risks of the individual owner but in producing among captains and oversea merchants more personal and vital interest in the success of the voyages undertaken. A similar pooling of interests is observable in the manner of placing insurance. Groups of merchants in the larger British or American ports<sup>32</sup> underwrote the insurance demanded on vessels and cargoes, taking individual risks to an amount in most cases of £50 to £100.<sup>33</sup> Insurance was made for each voyage or section of a voyage and rates varied according to the distance covered, the dangers likely to be encountered, and the season of the year.<sup>34</sup> For voyages between any two of the three groups of ports represented by Great Britain, North America, and the West Indies two per cent. to three per cent. was usually paid.<sup>35</sup> Thus a vessel going from Rhode Island to Bristol via Jamaica was insured for the whole trip at four per cent. to six per cent.<sup>36</sup> A word may be added concerning the captains and crews. Of the skippers some were men of education and social

<sup>31</sup> Pemberton Papers, XXI. 79; XXV. 110; Coates Papers, Elias Bland to John Reynell, London, May 31, 1746; Stevens, Porter, and Company to John Reynell, Madeira, April 10, 1748. William Redwood to Samuel Coates, Newport, July 6, 1773, *Com. of R. I.*, I. 233, 235, 511.

<sup>32</sup> Of the merchants whose papers have been examined those of Philadelphia found underwriters in America while those of Rhode Island placed their insurance in England. New England merchants however sometimes turned to colonial underwriters. Coates Papers, Samuel Briard to John Reynell, Antigua, August 22, 1759. Sometimes a vessel was insured in England and in the colonies at the same time. Coates Papers, John Wendell to John Reynell, Portsmouth (N. H.), July 5, 1759.

<sup>33</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 120, 148, 149, 185, *et al.* In England a policy cost 8 shillings and an agent who placed insurance often charged  $\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. commission for his trouble.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 166, 221, 253, 254, 296, 397; Clifford Papers, IV. 157; Coates Papers, John Moffat to John Reynell, Portsmouth, August 14, 1758.

<sup>35</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 120, 148, 149, 185.

<sup>36</sup> In time of war rates were of course much higher when the policies covered seizures by war vessels or privateers. Thus in 1757, 1758, and 1759 rates for voyages between the continent and the West Indies were 11 per cent. to 22 per cent., between the continent and Great Britain 15 per cent. to 40 per cent., and between the West Indies and Great Britain 22 per cent. to 40 per cent. Coates Papers, general.

equipment, connected by ties of blood or friendship with the merchants and often entering their ranks after apprenticeship at sea.<sup>37</sup> The majority were hardy seamen, more at home with the wheel than with the pen, yet able to manage the business of the owners under conditions which often presented the greatest difficulties. The practice of allowing to them, in addition to wages and commissions,<sup>38</sup> the privilege of carrying certain amounts of goods on their own account<sup>39</sup> must have quickened their interest. Of their general honesty and ability there seems no question. Of the sailors, whose numbers may be estimated as one for eight tons in the smaller craft and one for twelve in the larger,<sup>40</sup> one hears less. They too would seem to have been well paid<sup>41</sup> and well behaved. About one-third of their number were colored.<sup>42</sup>

So far we have dealt with shipping operated from North America and from the West Indies<sup>43</sup> alone. But it must be remembered that British vessels also were employed in the carrying-trade between the islands and the continent. Of these, two classes are to be distinguished, the "stationed" ships and the "seekers".<sup>44</sup> The stationed ships were vessels assigned definitely to this branch of commerce. They visited successively American, West Indian, and British ports and had the advantage of securing in the last two

<sup>37</sup> A good example of this is found in the Clifford Papers, IV. 144, 145, 149, 157. In one instance we find a former midshipman of the royal navy seeking employment as a merchant captain, *Com. of R. I.*, I. 31. One frequently finds that members of a merchant's family acted as captains of his ships.

<sup>38</sup> In spite of the difficulties in dealing with colonial currencies one may gain the impression that the captains were at least fairly well paid. How general was the practice of allowing to them commissions on sales I have not been able to discover. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 61, 441; II. 45.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> This calculation is made in the same manner and on virtually the same evidence as that concerning tonnage, *supra*.

<sup>41</sup> Forty-five shillings per month as compared with 27 shillings paid on British ships. *Parl. Hist.*, XIX. 708; B. T. 5: 1, p. 166. Irving declared that many of them were Britons but this was denied by the West Indian merchants. B. T. 5: 1, pp. 24, 166. At St. Eustatius the rate was \$10 per month. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 354.

<sup>42</sup> Papers printed by the order of the assembly of Jamaica for submission to Parliament, St. Iago, 1784.

<sup>43</sup> In a list of vessels arriving at Jamaica from North America between Christmas, 1766, and Christmas, 1767, only 3 per cent. are listed as West Indian vessels. P. R. O., C. O. 142: 19. Actual examples of the ownership of such vessels by West Indians are found in Pemberton Papers, XXIV. 44; XXV. 110.

<sup>44</sup> I have adopted the terminology employed by persons testifying before the Committee of Trade in 1784.

stages of their voyages at least freights of tempting bulk.<sup>45</sup> Yet they were under a serious handicap in competing with American vessels, and particularly with those of the smaller type. Owing to their large size and the inability of their owners to deal at so great a distance with producers, their operations in America were confined to large ports.<sup>46</sup> The freights which they here took on for the islands had been assembled at some expense and purchased by agents on commission.<sup>47</sup> By build they were unfitted for the carriage of lumber, yet the expenses of operating them were relatively high.<sup>48</sup> Most fatal of all was the fact that a full voyage could not regularly be completed within a year.<sup>49</sup> It is not surprising then to find that few ships were thus stationed for any length of time.<sup>50</sup> The "seekers" were vessels which ran between the islands and the continent in order to fill up time during which they would otherwise have been lying idle in West Indian harbors. Some had left British goods in southern Europe and crossed in ballast to the islands; others were British slavers. All were waiting to carry West Indian produce home. What profit they picked up in the intercolonial trade was merely added gain, for the three months' trip to the continent involved but little extra expense.<sup>51</sup> It would seem, how-

<sup>45</sup> Generally speaking, the bulk of freights carried from Great Britain to North America or the West Indies was small as compared with that of the return ladings. According to Irving the proportion was as 1 to 10. Again the bulk of the southbound greatly exceeded the bulk of the northbound cargoes passing between North America and the West Indies. B. T. 5: 1, pp. 120-122, 132; Coates Papers, Michael Atkins to John Reynell, Bristol, January 15, 1755.

<sup>46</sup> They apparently averaged about 200 tons in burthen, B. T. 5: 1, pp. 14, 64; return of vessels entering Jamaica from North America between Christmas, 1766, and Christmas, 1767, P. R. O., C. O. 142: 19; Br. Mus., Add. MSS. 12404.

<sup>47</sup> The rate for purchasing in North America was 5 per cent. to 6 per cent. in 1755, Coates Papers, Michael Atkins to John Reynell, Bristol, January 15, 1755.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, B. T. 5: 1, pp. 53, 54.

<sup>49</sup> The crop of sugar and rum came on the West India market from January to June. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 20, 225, 443, *et al.* But a vessel would not in many cases receive a full lading before the late spring and for the trip to England anywhere from 6 to 11 weeks were necessary. *Ibid.*, pp. 383, 390, 392, 396, 403, 499. If she arrived in England in July she would not be ready to sail again before late August or September. *Ibid.*, pp. 403, 413; Coates Papers, Michael Atkins to John Reynell, Bristol, January 15, 1755. Yet it was necessary that she should reach North America, discharge her cargo, reload, and arrive at the islands by Christmas time or the beginning of January. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 433; B. T. 5: 1, pp. 13, 14; Coates Papers, Michael Atkins to John Reynell, Bristol, January 15, 1755. That she should succeed in doing this year after year was practically impossible. Atkins to Reynell, *supra*; B. T. 5: 1, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Irving's statement to this effect, B. T. 5: 1, p. 121, is borne out by a letter of Elias Bland to John Reynell, August 17, 1756, in the Coates Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Some in fact went merely in return for the promise of a lading for England, others in order to escape hurricanes. B. T. 5: 1, pp. 39, 40, 64.

ever, that their share of the carrying trade, like that of the stationed ships, was comparatively small.<sup>52</sup>

So much for the general outlines of the trade. For the study of details it will be convenient to confine our attention to the simple and typical case of a small ship, owned and despatched by a North American merchant, carrying no supercargo, and engaging for the time in no other branch of commerce. The cargo of such a vessel, taken on at one or at several ports,<sup>53</sup> was usually the property of a number of persons. Besides the large share of the merchant principally concerned, various small lots of goods, representing the remittances and "ventures"<sup>54</sup> of North Americans or goods purchased on the orders of West Indians,<sup>55</sup> were taken as freight. On the deck were placed piles of lumber,<sup>56</sup> live stock,<sup>57</sup> and casks of salt provisions;<sup>58</sup> below were stored more perishable goods. But deck and hold were both well filled, for lumber, which on an average voyage filled two-thirds of all the space,<sup>59</sup> was used to fill all gaps.<sup>60</sup> The cargo safely stowed and bonds given for its delivery at destinations legally permissible,<sup>61</sup> the sailing orders<sup>62</sup> were opened. In the framing of these orders careful consideration had probably been given to the nature and amounts of shipments which had recently left

<sup>52</sup> B. T. 5: 1, pp. 48, 53, 54. According to the report of the governor of Jamaica in 1774 very few British ships carried American produce to that island. C. O. 137: 69. The return of vessels arriving at Jamaica from North America between Christmas, 1766, and Christmas, 1767, shows that the tonnage of the British vessels amounted to only 17 per cent. of the whole. C. O. 142: 19. It will be remembered that the trade of Jamaica amounted to nearly half that of all the British islands combined.

<sup>53</sup> Excellent specimens of the old warehouses occupied by the West Indian merchants are still to be found on the Delaware waterfront at Philadelphia.

<sup>54</sup> A "venture" consisted of any consignment of goods sent as a matter of speculation to be sold for whatever they would bring. It might comprise no more than a single barrel of hams despatched by some thrifty housewife. Pemberton Papers, XXI. 79; Clifford Papers, IV. 114; Coates Papers, Joshua Howell to John Reynell, Barbados, August 3, 1748.

<sup>55</sup> Some West Indian merchants probably contracted for fixed annual supplies of North American goods. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 176.

<sup>56</sup> Evidence of Brook Watson before the Committee of Trade, March 20, 1784. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 257, 490. The practice was not however without its disadvantages. B. T. 5: 1, p. 54; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 450, 451.

<sup>57</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 261.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>59</sup> According at least to Irving's estimate, B. T. 5: 1, p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> Clifford Papers, V. 121; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 257.

<sup>61</sup> Specimens of the various kinds of bonds and certificates then in use are preserved in the collection of the Hist. Soc. of Pa., Custom House Papers, Philadelphia, I.

<sup>62</sup> E. g., *Com. of R. I.*, I. 60, 64, 96, 162.

North America for particular West India islands and to the direction of the prevailing winds.<sup>63</sup> On conclusions arrived at from these facts, and because agreements had been made for the delivery of goods at certain ports, the routes to be followed on both the outward and the home voyages were perhaps laid down. But more likely was the captain to discover that the owners expected him to search out the places where the highest prices were to be obtained in the disposal of his out-cargo and the lowest in the purchase of the return lading.<sup>64</sup> Supposing that he received orders so loosely framed, his route was largely predetermined by the direction of the winds. By searching first the Windward Islands, then the Leeward, and finally Jamaica he found through most of the year winds which favored him at every stage.<sup>65</sup> The voyage from the last continental to the first island port occupied, in ordinary weather, from three to four weeks.<sup>66</sup>

Having arrived in the islands the captain had at once to set about disposing of his goods. Disposal of at least a part had probably been prearranged. Some parcels had been sent as remittances to creditors, others consigned to commission agents who undertook sale and collection at a rate of ten or twelve per cent.<sup>67</sup> Regarding the disposition of the remainder a choice of methods offered. The captain delivered them to commission agents,<sup>68</sup> personally sold them to merchants and planters in considerable lots,<sup>69</sup> or, as a last resort, retailed them from a shop rented for the purpose.<sup>70</sup> In any case his difficulties were great. West Indian merchants and planters alike enjoyed but small repute in business affairs,<sup>71</sup> and, irrespective of

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 257, 258.

<sup>64</sup> It is possible that the merchants of Philadelphia issued orders of this sort more frequently than those of Rhode Island. Such a conclusion might be drawn from such papers as have been examined. But in Rhode Island the practice was not unknown. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 15.

<sup>65</sup> The reason for this becomes apparent on the examination of any chart showing the direction of the prevailing winds. Particularly good instances of such voyages are found in the Clifford Papers, IV. 96, 114.

<sup>66</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 35, 41, 82, 133, 134, 167, 192, 216, 255, 263, *et al.*

<sup>67</sup> Clifford Papers, V. 175, 178; Coates Papers, David Togo to John Reynell, Antigua, May 31, 1756. This was the rate in 1770. It appears to have been 15 per cent. some years earlier.

<sup>68</sup> This was the method followed in what probably constituted a great majority of cases.

<sup>69</sup> Pemberton Papers, XXIV. 21; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 255. In some cases at least the captain in making such sales was paid at about the usual commission rate. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> This method was probably adopted only in rare cases after the middle of the century and then with little success. Clifford Papers, IV. 144, 145.

<sup>71</sup> The North Americans constantly accused them of being generally negligent, reckless in contracting debts and slow in offering payment. Sometimes we

the characters of the persons engaged, the keenest bargaining was required in every deal. Thanks to the smallness of the islands and their extreme dependence on outside supplies, any kind of American produce was apt to command very different prices in any two of them at the same time. For the same reasons prices fell and rose sharply with the arrival of fresh consignments or the non-appearance of those expected.<sup>72</sup> Again, the price agreed upon in any particular bargain was arrived at with reference to the method of payment. On account of the scarcity of currency,<sup>73</sup> the difficulty in the collection of debts,<sup>74</sup> and the superior opportunities for purchase of West Indian produce offered by the foreign islands,<sup>75</sup> cash and bills of exchange<sup>76</sup> were in great demand. Hence North American goods were disposed of at a much lower rate where money was offered than where credit had to be given<sup>77</sup> or local produce accepted in ex-

change charges of deliberate dishonesty. Pemberton Papers, XXIV. 21, 44; XXVI. 147; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 174, 175, 269, 297, 373. A young merchant of Philadelphia, Ezekiel Edwards, thus describes them: "A person cannot be too cautious how he connects himself with a Barbados merchant, for many of them keep no books and if they can procure money enough to furnish their tables every day with barbecue, fish and sangree [sic] they are entirely regardless how their accounts run on . . . and most of them will bear running for years together without any marks of shame and perhaps promise ten times a day, if you can meet them so often, that they will pay in an hour." Pemberton Papers, XXIV. 44.

<sup>72</sup> *E. g., Com. of R. I.*, I. 211.

<sup>73</sup> The British West Indies had no currency of their own and received very little from the mother-country. They were forced to depend mainly upon the small amounts obtained through commerce with the foreign islands, and much of this foreign currency was drained off by the North American trade. Constant but ineffectual appeals were made to the home government. See, *e. g.*, the address of the assembly of Jamaica, December 18, 1778, C. O. 137: 73, and *An Inquiry concerning the Trade Commerce and Policy of the Island of Jamaica* (St. Iago, 1757). For denominations and values of the Spanish coins in use, see Clifford Papers, IV. 119; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 467.

<sup>74</sup> See note 71.

<sup>75</sup> Sugar and indigo as well as molasses and taffia could be obtained at a considerably lower rate. This was especially true of the French islands. Thus we find that one American captain was ordered to sell for cash at St. Eustatius the British West India produce received in exchange for his lumber and provisions, and to use the cash so obtained in the purchase of molasses, sugar, and indigo at Hispaniola. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 61. Sometimes remittance was made by West India merchants in the form of produce shipped on order of the latter from a foreign island. Pemberton Papers, XX. 128.

<sup>76</sup> Bills of exchange, which were usually drawn on British merchants, were as acceptable as cash but could seldom be obtained except for cash. *Com. of R. I.*, I. 262; Coates Papers, David Togo to John Reynell, Antigua, July 5, 1756. Numerous examples in the Coates Papers show that exchange on London was usually at 55 per cent. to 67½ per cent. This rate is in part accounted for by the fact that the pound sterling was worth 28 shillings in Jamaica currency.

<sup>77</sup> Clifford Papers, V. 175.

change.<sup>78</sup> In the last-mentioned case, *i. e.*, where barter took place,<sup>79</sup> the matter was still further complicated by the fact that the prices of the articles received in payment were scarcely less variable than those of the commodities offered for sale.<sup>80</sup> In any case the captain was confronted with innumerable difficulties and delays. Weeks or even months probably elapsed before the whole of the cargo was sold and terms of payment arranged.<sup>81</sup> In the meantime something had probably been accomplished in the matter of securing the home freight.

In preparing for the return trip the captain probably received the assistance of local agents.<sup>82</sup> Of assistance he could make good use, for now he met the difficulties of lading which he experienced on the continent combined with the difficulties of bargaining which he had just encountered in the islands. Some parcels of goods came as remittance to his owner on earlier debts,<sup>83</sup> some as payment for produce just sold,<sup>84</sup> some for sale by his owner on commission,<sup>85</sup> and others still (probably in answer to advertisement) as casual freights.<sup>86</sup> Finally, purchases were to be made with cash which he now had in hand. Such purchases probably necessitated visits to foreign islands,<sup>87</sup> but, no matter where the bargaining was done, in-

<sup>78</sup> Report of the Committee of Trade, B. T. 5: 1, p. 215; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 34, 224; Clifford Papers, IV. 33; V. 175.

<sup>79</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 178, 224, 320.

<sup>80</sup> Sugar varied in value according to its fineness of grain and its color, rum according to its strength or "proof". A common test was that rum should "sink oil". Variations are to be found even in the case of molasses. Moreover special prices were commanded by the rum and sugar of certain islands, *e. g.*, Jamaica rum and St. Kitts sugar. The price of course also varied according to demand and supply. Thus American captains feared to push their purchases lest by so doing they might advance the prices. In general prices were low in the spring when the new produce came in and high in the autumn. Thus rum sold from January to July at 23 pence to 33 pence per gallon, and from August to December at 23 pence to 48 pence. Clifford Papers, IV. 114, 145, 230, 233; Coates Papers; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 45, 51, 81, 84, 168, 179, 198, 225, 229, 296, 312, 325, 371, 373; Hist. Soc. of Pa., Wharton Papers, Journal of Charles Wharton, pp. 490, 495.

<sup>81</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 36, 360, 366.

<sup>82</sup> *E. g.*, *ibid.*, pp. 196, 225, 244.

<sup>83</sup> Pemberton Papers, XX. 128; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Thus a commission agent sometimes undertook to remit by return voyage West Indian goods in part payment for the North American produce sent down. Pemberton Papers, XX. 128.

<sup>85</sup> The commission rate in Philadelphia was 10 per cent. Clifford Papers, V. 178.

<sup>86</sup> Pemberton Papers, XIX. 29; XXIV. 21. Some of these casual freights were also for sale on commission.

<sup>87</sup> Of these the French portion of Santo Domingo was the favorite. Here was produced more than one-half of all the molasses and taffia made in the

numerable variations of price, arising again from conditions of supply and demand, from differences in the qualities and values of the goods, and from methods of payment had to be taken into account. Since the first installments of the crops were often sold in advance<sup>88</sup> he had perhaps to consider himself fortunate that purchases could be made at all. And even when all negotiations were completed, serious difficulties were encountered in the actual assembling of the goods. The produce of the sugar plantations came gradually to market from February to June,<sup>89</sup> while bad weather sometimes prevented for weeks the operation of the primitive horse-driven mills in which the cane was ground.<sup>90</sup> So dilatory were the planters in carrying their produce to the shipping ports that purchasers had often to sail around the islands and invade the plantations in order to secure their goods.<sup>91</sup> Thus the captain had again to encounter endless delays before he could announce to an impatient owner that the ship was ready to clear for home.<sup>92</sup>

Viewed thus in detail, the trade seems almost a trivial thing. In reality it constituted a vital part of the greatest commercial system

French islands. Before 1767 trade with the British North Americans was carried on mainly through the port of Monte Christi, a Spanish boundary port notorious as existing almost solely for this purpose. During the Seven Years' War "flags of truce" were employed and at its close the removal of Acadians to Santo Domingo was used to screen much of this commerce. In 1767 the French government in order to secure to itself the regulation and profits of this trade opened St. Nicholas Mole to foreign vessels of 100 tons or more and allowed the importation there of wood, tar, live stock, and hides. The restriction as to tonnage was seemingly not enforced and the importation of fish was permitted shortly afterwards. According to an official report 465,000 gallons of molasses were sold at St. Nicholas for 23 sous (currency) per gal. from July to September, 1774. Archives du Ministère des Colonies, St. Domingue, first ser., nos. 128, 129, 130, 135; second ser., no. 24; C. O. 137: 59; C. O. 5: 38; *Gazette de France* for 1767, p. 611.

<sup>88</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 231, 243.

<sup>89</sup> B. T. 5: 1, p. 19; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 20, 225, 265, 433. The harvest on the north side of Jamaica began in March, on the south side in February. In some parts of the island sugar was made throughout most of the year.

<sup>90</sup> *Com. of R. I.*, I. 36, 432.

<sup>91</sup> Clifford Papers, IV. 157, 159; *Com. of R. I.*, I. 192, 196.

<sup>92</sup> "Vessels from North America think nothing of lying four, five or six months". Clifford Papers, IV. 159, Harper to Clifford, Grenada, March 10, 1765. Perhaps American captains and merchants did not always find these delays especially onerous. We learn that Captain Zacha. Hutchins of Philadelphia gambled away "several hundred pounds in specie—also his brig valued at £750" at Barbados in 1770. Pemberton Papers, XXI. 79. On the other hand, Benjamin Birkett is able to announce that his friend and travelling companion Ezekiel Edwards is "the same in every instance as when he left Philadelphia, not corrupted by the vices of the island". Coates Papers, Benjamin Birkett to Samuel Coates, Barbados, October 10, 1772.

of the century.<sup>93</sup> To the West Indian its continuance was an essential condition of his prosperity, almost of his existence. Lumber and provisions produced in the islands or brought from Europe were high in price and irregular in supply. Reliance upon them must have made serious if not fatal inroads both on the planter's profits and on the productive power of the islands. Nor would the loss consequent on interruption of trade with North America have ended there, for molasses and rum could not even in greatly reduced quantities have maintained their prices if offered in the European market alone. As for the continental colonies, trade as they might with the foreign islands, the severance of relations with the British-owned group would have hindered their development to a marked degree. Farmers, fishermen, and lumbermen, from the Kennebec to the Savannah, would have sought in vain sufficient outlets for their goods. Merchants of New England and the middle colonies would have been hard pressed to find the means of liquidating their debts for British goods and the means of purchasing furs, fish, and slaves. By inference it may be seen how vitally important was the success of this intercolonial commerce for the interests of the mother-country herself. Since the economic decline of either group of colonies must have affected her industry, her commerce, her shipping, and her revenues, hers was a double interest in the trade. It is not fanciful to trace connection between the sawmills of the Kennebec and the sugar refineries of the Thames Valley or to state that the amounts of hardware and textiles which went either to Philadelphia or to Kingston were in no small degree determined by the quantities of flour and rum which passed between those two ports. Nor was it only love of liberty which in 1774 united Whigs of England, of America, and of Jamaica<sup>94</sup> in opposition to the Intolerable Acts.

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<sup>93</sup> I have discussed the importance of the trade from the West Indian and from the British points of view in my paper on "British Commercial Policy in the West Indies, 1783-1793", published in the *English Historical Review* for July, 1916. Its importance from the American point of view is so well known that detailed discussion is unnecessary.

<sup>94</sup> The assembly of Jamaica, December 23, 1774, petitioned the king in behalf of the continental colonies. The petition after expressing alarm at "the approaching horrors of an unnatural contest between Great Britain and her colonies in which the most dreadful calamities to this island and the inevitable destruction of the small sugar colonies are involved", boldly asserts the principle that "no one part of Your Majesty's English subjects ever can or ever could legislate for another part". It protests against "a plan almost carried into execution for enslaving the colonies founded . . . on a claim of Parliament to bind the colonists in all cases whatsoever", against the illegal grant of colonial property to the crown, and against the encouragement of the "murder" of colonists. It implores the king to protect the colonists by mediating between them and his "European subjects". P. R. O., C. O. 137: 69.